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Gary McQuarrie

Brooks C. Place

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Photographic Documentation of Brierfield: “The House Jeff Built”

by Gary McQuarrie and Brooks C. Place

Brierfield was the plantation home of Jefferson Davis located on Davis Bend in Warren County, Mississippi.¹ The eldest brother of Jefferson Davis, Joseph E. Davis, acquired approximately 6,900 acres in the choice western and southern portions of the 11,000-acre peninsula, including the river frontage, in 1818. The river-encircled area of fine cotton land became known to locals as “Davis Bend.” The elder Davis sold part of the land to friends such as General John A. Quitman, but reserved to himself 5,280 acres on which to raise cotton. Joseph Davis supposedly “gifted” to his brother approximately 2,320 acres in 1835, probably to settle an indebtedness related to Jefferson’s interest in their father’s estate. But Joseph never gave Jefferson a deed, which later caused legal problems. Much of the property, which had about two and one-half miles of river frontage, was covered in woods and brambles that required clearing in order to allow eventual cultivation. Jefferson and his new wife, Varina Howell Davis, laughingly referred to it as the “Brierfield,” when they first saw it and the name stuck. Enslaved people cleared the property, constructed a home and other buildings, and cultivated cotton over the coming years.

On June 24, 1862, Union soldiers advancing toward Vicksburg made a night landing on Davis Bend, and General Peter J. Osterhaus ordered the burning of Joseph Davis’s Hurricane plantation home, destroying the mansion and its contents. Although the Union forces visited Brierfield, they did not set fire to it. The plantation had become disorganized due to flooding and the war. Prior to the raid, Jefferson Davis’s parlor furniture, books, and family correspondence had been taken to Joseph Davis’s inland farms for safekeeping. During General Ulysses S. Grant’s initial thrust for Vicksburg from Memphis early in 1863, Rear Admiral David G. Farragut

¹ Frank Edgar Everett, Jr., *Brierfield: Plantation Home of Jefferson Davis* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1971), 7, 8, 18, 19, 23-27, 75-78, 91, 118, 119.

GARY MCQUARRIE is retired and is managing editor of *Civil War Navy—The Magazine*. BROOKS C. PLACE, a native of Frankestown, New Hampshire, and a former computer programmer, is the great-great nephew of Dr. George Holmes Bixby. He is an avid history enthusiast of Frankestown and the Bixby family.



Illustrated map of Davis Bend 1818-1861 showing Joseph Davis's plantation and home (Hurricane) opposite Hurricane Island and Jefferson Davis's plantation and home (Brierfield). Inside front cover illustration from Frank E. Everett, Jr. Brierfield: Plantation Home of Jefferson Davis (Hattiesburg, MS: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1971). Design by Jules B. McKee. Courtesy of University Press of Mississippi (www.upress.state.ms.us).

had assisted Grant by steaming upriver from the south. On Farragut's approach, the fleet made a landing at David Bend in May, and

“...sailors from the fleet were allowed on shore and despoiled the plantations of most of their beauty. Everything of value was either carried away or destroyed, and the plantation presented the appearance of having suffered a deluge and tornado at the same time . . . The place will be securely garrisoned by negro troops. Guerillas will not find it to their interest to pay a visit, especially as it is the design to establish there a station for a gunboat to cover our troops in case of an emergency . . .”²

² Thomas W. Knox, “What Has Become of Jeff. Davis’ Plantation,” *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 2, col 2-3, December 28, 1863.

A Vicksburg newspaper reported on July 1, 1863, that Yankees had rifled Brierfield, destroyed all farming implements, as well as household and kitchen furniture, and had defaced the premises. After the fall of Vicksburg on July 4, the Union Army took control of Brierfield and Hurricane for use by the Freedmen's Bureau.

George Holmes Bixby, M.D.: Photographer on the Western Rivers

Along with several staff members from the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Museum in Missouri, the authors recently confirmed that Dr. George Holmes Bixby (great-great uncle of Brooks C. Place), who served as the chief medical officer aboard the USS *Red Rover*, was an amateur photographer of significant skill who took many photographs of gunboats and other vessels of the Mississippi River Squadron while aboard the Navy's "first hospital ship" from June 1862 until the end of his service in the fall of 1865.³ Bixby was one of a small group of physicians who were also amateur photographers of the Civil War, the foremost being Dr. Reed D. Bontecou, who photographed surgical procedures and soldiers' wounds for the purpose of educating other physicians.⁴ However, Dr. Bixby photographed navy vessels rather than patients. In the four photograph albums assembled by Dr. Bixby that were passed down through his family, there were three photograph prints of Brierfield, 'The House Jeff Built.' With additional analysis and research findings presented below, it became apparent that Dr. Bixby took multiple photographs of the famous plantation home on a single occasion when he visited the Davis plantation to deliver medical supplies and that some of his images of Brierfield are now held by several organizations, including the Library of Congress (Control No. 2014646150, LC-DIG-ppmsca-35099).

George Holmes Bixby was the son of Levi and Mary Bixby. Levi Bixby was serving as American Consulate to Suriname (Dutch Guiana), South America, when George was born on November 2, 1837, in the colony's capital, Paramaribo.⁵ Levi sent his children, including George, back to his hometown

³ Larry Toll, Alan Chilton, Jeffrey Patrick, and Brooks Place, "George Holmes Bixby, M.D., USS *Red Rover*: Photographer on the Western Rivers," *Civil War Navy—The Magazine*, 7:2 (Fall 2019), 4-17.

⁴ Stanley B. Burns, *Shooting Soldiers: Civil War Medical Photography By R.B. Bontecou* (New York, NY: Burns Archive Press, an imprint of The Burns Archive, 2011), 8, 18, 34, 35.

⁵ W. R. Cochrane and George K. Wood, Genealogies: Bixby. In: *History of Francetown, N.H.: From its Earliest Settlement April, 1758, to January 1, 1891, with a Brief Genealogical Record of all the Francetown Families* (Nashua, NH: Town of Francetown, printed by James H. Barker, 1895), 521-523.

of Francestown, New Hampshire, to live with his brother Paul and to be educated in the Francestown schools. George received his professional education at the Vermont Medical College at Woodstock, Vermont, at Harvard Medical School, and finally the Medical Department of Dartmouth College, where he graduated in 1858 with a medical degree.⁶ Subsequently, he traveled to Europe to study gynecology in Paris and Vienna. When news of the American Civil War broke



out, Dr. Bixby returned to Boston in January 1862 and immediately offered his medical services to the

Carte de visite photograph of Acting Assistant Surgeon George Holmes Bixby, circa 1862-1865. Courtesy of Mr. Brooks C. Place.

Western Sanitary Commission. He was first assigned to the large river steamer *Empress* and soon demonstrated his medical abilities during the transport of casualties and sick soldiers from the Battle of Shiloh. As a result, at the recommendation of the president of the Western Sanitary Commission, Bixby joined the Navy on June 1, 1862, and was appointed as acting assistant surgeon and promptly assigned to the *Red Rover* as the senior medical officer, remaining so throughout the Civil War until his honorable discharge on September 26, 1865.⁷ The travels of the *Red Rover* up and down the Mississippi River from Cairo, Illinois, to New Orleans, Louisiana, as part of the Mississippi Squadron are well

⁶ Granville P. Conn, *History of the New Hampshire Surgeons in the War of Rebellion* (Concord, NH: New Hampshire Association of Military Surgeons, printed by Ira C. Evans Company, 1906), 313-315.

⁷ fold3.com. *Civil War: Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanding Officers of Squadrons, Mississippi Squadron*, May 1, 1863 to June 30, 1863, A. W. Pennock, Roll 131, Digital Images, 1, and November 2, 1863 to December 31, 1863, A. W. Pennock, Roll 128, Digital Images, 10. fold3.com. *Civil War: Navy Survivors' Certificates*, Certificate No. 7758, George H. Bixby, Digital Images, 1-107.

documented. Logbooks indicate that the *Red Rover* made at least two visits to the Jefferson Davis plantation: on July 31, 1863, to deliver medicine to the gunboat USS Carondelet and shortly after April 14, 1864, to deliver medical stores and supplies to ships of the squadron at the plantation.⁸ Other visits also may have occurred given the ship's frequent travels upriver and downriver.

After the war and later in his life, Dr. Bixby sent copies of some of his gunboat and other photographs to higher-ranking naval officers Rear Admiral Henry A. Walke and Admiral David Dixon Porter, under whom he had served, as gifts and reminiscences of their service together on the Mississippi River. In doing so, Bixby's subtle approach may have been designed to engender support of his Navy pension disability application that is documented in correspondences in his war pension file. Rear Admiral Walke, who had served in the Mississippi Squadron, responded to Dr. Bixby in his letter of November 28, 1892:

Dear Sir: I have the pleasure of accepting your valuable and acceptable presents as reminiscences of your services in the Navy, during the late war, with your letter and pamphlets, and the excellent photographs taken by yourself, namely: Gunboats of the Mississippi Flotilla, the Carondelet, the Louisville, the Black Hawk, House That Jeff Built, ... with an original request from me to you to receive some of the Carondelet's sick crew on board the hospital-steamer *Red Rover*, at Helena, Arkansas, for which please accept my hearty thanks ...

Dr. Bixby's photograph albums contained three prints of 'The House Jeff Built.' Details of the home, tree leaf and branch patterns, and ground appearance show that two of these prints are identical to the photograph held by the Library of Congress; the third print is also identical, with the exception that three soldiers are standing on the porch. The first two of Bixby's prints were made from the same glass plate negative. The third print is evidence that Dr. Bixby took at least two photographs that day from the same camera position—the home, tree leaf and branch patterns,

⁸ Edward C. Kenney, "From the Log of the *Red Rover* 1862-1865: A History of the First U.S. Navy Hospital Ship," *Missouri Historical Review* 15:1 (October 1965), 31-49.



Jefferson Davis's house, Brierfield, photographed by Dr. George H. Bixby, circa 1863-1864. Photograph taken with no soldiers on the front porch, captured from the same camera position on the same day as the photograph with the three soldiers standing on the porch. Courtesy of Mr. Brooks C. Place.



Jefferson Davis's house, Davis Bend, Mississippi. Albumen print, gift of Colonel Godwin Ordway, 1948. Library of Congress (Control No. 2014646150, LC-DIG-ppmsca-35099).

and ground appearance are identical to those in the first two prints, but there are three soldiers standing on the porch in the third. That print was made in 1892 when its negative had deteriorated and begun flaking (a note in Bixby's album documents the date). Both negatives are lost to history, likely having been discarded or lost at some point by relatives, as his belongings were stored at various locations and passed from relative to relative. Dr. Bixby would have taken these photographs on one of his visits to the plantation, as the 'House That Jeff Built' lettering on the portico would have first appeared after Union occupation of Davis Bend following the surrender of Vicksburg in July 1863 and was still there during the documented July 4, 1864, celebration at the plantation.

Similarly, Alamy, one of the largest companies in the stock photo



Jefferson Davis's house, Brierfield, photographed by Dr. George H. Bixby, circa 1863-1864. Three soldiers are standing on the front porch. Photograph captured from same camera position on the same day as the photograph with no soldiers standing on the porch. Print made from a deteriorating glass-plate negative in 1892. Courtesy of Mr. Brooks C. Place.

industry, offers images that are identical to Dr. Bixby's photograph with no one standing on the porch (same as the Library of Congress image): images MAJWMT ('Gift of John H. Gundlach' written on the back), PB7GB3, M7C07K, and KDEJF8 (images not shown)—M7C07K appears to be a print of poorer quality. In these images, the same details of the home, trees, and ground appearance are identical. None of the Alamy images are credited to a photographer. Interestingly, John H. Gundlach, a St. Louis real estate professional, was the son of Peter Gundlach, who was reportedly a Civil War veteran and became a well-recognized shoe merchant in St. Louis.⁹ After the war, the image MAJWMT may have been passed from father to son.

Other Photographs of Brierfield

Other Civil War photographers also took photographs of the Brierfield plantation house. One may have been David P. Barr (widely known as D. P. Barr), who was born in Ohio in 1839 and entered a partnership with J. W. Young around 1863.¹⁰ Barr and Young were Cincinnati photographers who followed Grant and their Ohio regiment to Memphis and Fort Pickering, becoming the official photographers of Fort Pickering during its occupation. After the capture of Vicksburg by Union forces, the two were certainly among the first, if not the first, to establish a gallery in the city.¹¹ Their work was marked 'Barr & Young, Army Photographers, Palace of Art, Vicksburg.' By June 1864, however, the partnership dissolved, and Barr established the Washington Photograph and Ambrotype Gallery on the third floor of the Odd Fellows Hall on Washington Street in Vicksburg. After the war, Barr was active in Illinois and Kentucky in the 1870s and later in Houston and San Antonio, Texas, from the 1880s until the 1920s.¹²

⁹ Walter Barlow Stevens, *Centennial History of Missouri (The Center State): One Hundred Years in the Union 1820-1921, Volume V* (St. Louis-Chicago, IL.: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), 144-147.

¹⁰ Bob Zeller, *The Blue and Gray in Black and White: A History of Civil War Photography* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 144.

¹¹ Jeff Giambrone, "Photographers in Occupied Vicksburg," *Military Images*, 23:4 (January/February 2002), 13-16.

¹² Shannon Thomas Perich, *The Changing Face of Portrait Photography: From Daguerreotype to Digital* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American History in association with the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2011), 33-36.



Brierfield, 'The House That Jeff Built.' J. Mack Moore, from the photograph collection of the Old Court House Museum, Vicksburg, Mississippi. Original photographer not known, but may have been D. P. Barr.

The photographs of Brierfield held by the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) and the J. Mack Moore Collection at the Old Court House Museum, Vicksburg, were possibly taken by Barr and are similar with only minor differences. Both show the home occupied by Union soldiers with a flag draped across the center porch columns; however, the WHS photograph has several soldiers mounted on horses, while the Moore photograph shows two cows and an unmounted horse in the yard with what appears to be a photographer's camera mounted on a tripod near an equipment box—both photographs also show a buggy with retracted canopy pulled by a pale-colored horse to the right of the porch. (Moore, who was born in Vicksburg in 1869, became a freelance photographer and was expert in the making of prints from glass-plate negatives, but he did not take this photograph. Moore acquired glass-plate negatives from older Vicksburg photographers over his lifetime but also made his own negatives from others' photographs and wrote his name at the bottom of either type of these negatives to identify his own collection of negatives, as reflected in the print of Brierfield). In addition, the WHS and "Moore" photographs were taken from slightly different positions in the yard, with the WHS photograph taken at a slightly closer and

more frontal position to the home and with the yard cleared of animals and other objects. Based on the differences in shadows, they also appear to have been taken at different times of the day. The details, particularly the draped flag on the front porch, however, suggest that both photographs were taken within a similar timeframe, most likely shortly after the surrender of Vicksburg to Union forces on July 4, 1863. The flag draped across the porch columns seems to be a symbol of the recent victory at Vicksburg. The Bixby photographs were apparently taken after the WHS and "Moore" photographs, as the skinny tree in the center of these other photographs indicate that the tree had been removed by the time Bixby took his photographs, probably to allow a better, unobstructed view and after the draped flag was removed from the porch columns. This timing would be consistent with either of Dr. Bixby's documented visits to the plantation. The tree on the right side of all of these Brierfield photographs appears to be dead, not a tree having simply lost its leaves, thereby making it difficult to estimate the time of year the photographs were taken.

As mentioned previously, an additional July 4 celebration at Brierfield was held in 1864, a year after the surrender of Vicksburg. The Vicksburg Daily Herald described it as follows:



'The House Jeff Built.' Exterior view of Brierfield, plantation home of Jefferson Davis. Photographic print 4 x 2.5 inches. Photographer not known. WHi-76916, Wisconsin Historical Society.

“The JEFF. Place” is also a very fine plantation. The residence has not been injured, except the door locks and one or two marble mantels broken up, apparently for trophies. The JEFF furniture has been removed, but the rooms are still furnished with furniture brought there . . . The portico in front is supported with pillars, and these form the only ornamental features of the house, except such as were added for this occasion by the artistic touches of our Northern sisters. Of these were festoons, wreaths, stars and garlands, mysteriously woven in evergreens and flowers. Over the portico entrance outside, were the following inscriptions, the letters being formed by cedar foliage: “THE HOUSE THAT JEFF. BUILT. WELCOME.” The latter motto was arched and with festoons made a very beautiful appearance . . .”¹³

Jefferson Davis did not think much of the manner in which his plantation home had been decorated for this event. Writing to William T. Walthall, he noted, “. . . If you do not get the better picture, and have to use this, please erase the impudent lettering [“The House Jeff Built”]

¹³“Celebration of the Fourth of July at the Residence of Jefferson Davis, Davis’s Bend, Mississippi, The Freedmen’s Paradise, The Trip,” *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, 1:25 July 6, 1864, 2, col 2-3.



Home of Jeff Davis, Port Gibson, Claiborne County, Mississippi. Postcard from the Cooper (Forrest Lamar) Postcard Collection. Item 2702, PI/1992.001. The postcard is from the 1900s and is based on the Brierfield photograph in the J. Mack Moore Collection. “Pope Drug Co.” is inscribed in the lower left corner, probably as a promotion. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

which the Yankees put on the pediment on the occasion of a fete they held at my house [July 4, 1864].”¹⁴ It is likely that Davis did not know the exact date the lettering had been placed on the pediment as this lettering appears in all of the different photographs of the home, but Davis was indeed aware of the specific celebration event and assumed the lettering was placed there on that occasion. Of note, the presence of draped flags on the columns was not mentioned in the 1864 newspaper article, consistent with that decoration having occurred in July 1863.

Fate of Brierfield and Davis Bend

In the early 1900s in Mississippi, Brierfield was popularized into a postcard. “Home of Jeff Davis, Port Gibson, Mississippi,” was an artistic rendition of the well-known J. Mack Moore Collection photograph of Brierfield, with an attribution to the Pope Drug Company, the apparent sponsor, of the card that is now part of the Forrest Lamar Cooper Postcard Collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.¹⁵ In 1859, Mississippi River flooding inundated the Davis peninsula with resultant narrowing of the peninsula’s neck. During the Civil War, the river poured water over the weakened levees even higher than in 1859. In 1867, the surging river burst through crumbling banks, changing its course, and as a result Davis Bend became Davis Island, with the neck being completely eroded away. Almost one hundred years later, the surviving heirs of Jefferson Davis conveyed Brierfield in 1953 to two private individuals who then sold it in 1954 to new owners who made it a private hunting reserve. In response to the 1927 flood on the Mississippi River, the Army Corps of Engineers constructed massive levees on both sides of the river, but deemed Davis Island too small and insignificant to barricade.¹ By 1983, water covered all but 2 percent of the island, completely submerging the decayed remains of the two historic Davis plantations.¹⁶

¹⁴ Letter to William T. Walthall, November 3, 1877, Lynda Lasswell Crist, editor, Suzanne Scott Gibbs, assistant editor, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Volume 13, 1871-1879* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Note that Brierfield was not actually located in Port Gibson.

¹⁶ Brian Hamilton, “Davis Island: A Confederate Shrine, Submerged.” EdgeEffects. Posted October 9, 2014, <http://edgeeffects.net/davis-island-a-confederate-shrine-submerged/>.